



Friday, January 24, 2020

Toronto District School Board's Pre-Budget Consultation 2020 Submission

Members of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs,

Please accept this submission, sent on behalf of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), as the Board's pre-budget consultation for 2020.

I want to begin by stating that the TDSB understands the fiscal reality facing the province and knows that the resources at your disposal are not limitless. We, and other school boards across the province, face a similar reality every year as we work to pass a balanced budget.

Last year, for example, the TDSB was required to make \$67.8 million in reductions to staff and changes to program and service delivery to balance the budget. This \$67.8 million included a \$42.1 million cut in provincial government funding, as well as an annual structural deficit of \$25.7 million.

In previous years when the Board faced a budget shortfall, we did our best to limit reductions that would directly impact students. With a budget shortfall of \$67.8 million, this was just not possible last year.

To keep the programs that we value at the TDSB, we had to consider how to deliver them differently. In almost all cases, the budget reductions did not eliminate programs. They did, however, offer different delivery models or reductions to the scope of programs to reduce operating costs. In other words, we had to get creative so that our students could continue to benefit from the programs and services that we offer, and that make such a difference in their educational experience.

As you'll see below, our submission not only explains the TDSB's key budgetary pressures, but also offers recommendations and potential changes to government policy so that the TDSB, and other school boards across Ontario, can continue to offer the outstanding programs and services that provide immense benefit our students.



Special Education

The TDSB consistently spends more than our full grant on Special Education. Last year, we spent approximately \$47.8M more on Special Education than we were funded by the province. This situation is not unique to the TDSB, with most school boards in Ontario overspending in special education. With more and more students requiring some type of special education support, this overspending will only increase unless provincial funding in this area is enhanced. Something needs to change.

In addition, as we move to an inclusion model for special education (where appropriate), additional funding support is required for things such as classroom teacher training. The bottom line is that special education is not funded appropriately by the province.

In order to ensure that all of our students receive the support they need, we urge the province to reconsider the special education funding model and make the appropriate enhancements to meet the financial needs of school boards and the educational needs of the students of Ontario.

Class Size

The government's class size increase is concerning to the TDSB on a number of levels, most importantly its impact on student learning. At the secondary level, we are similarly concerned about the impact on course offerings, especially in smaller schools.

In the first year of this increase, many TDSB schools experienced a reduction to the number of courses offered. This situation will only get worse in future years as a result of the large number of small schools at the TDSB. Until the Ministry re-establishes the Program Area Review process, the TDSB has no way of reducing the impact of increased class sizes on program offerings in schools.

From a financial perspective, we are also concerned that the Ministry did not account for restrictions under collective agreements that prohibit some boards, including the TDSB, from increasing class sizes. For example, when the Ministry increased class sizes in Grades 4 to 8, the TDSB, and other boards, were financially penalized due to local agreements that did not allow similar class sizes. For the TDSB, this amounted to \$9.6M for the 2019-20 school year.

As we move forward on this issue, we urge the province to commit to listening closely to the results of the Ministry consultation on secondary school class size, paying close attention to the impact on programs, course offerings and student supports and understand the impact to local boards based on their collective agreements.

We also urge the province to put the decision to increase average class sizes in high schools on hold until there is a better understanding of what this would mean to individual school boards.



Lastly, we urge the province to compensate boards, including the TDSB, whose collective agreements require a smaller average class size in Grades 4-8 and in the secondary panel.

E-Learning

The TDSB has serious concerns with the government's plan to introduce mandatory e-learning courses for all secondary students. Since the plan was announced, school boards have not received any further information, which has raised many questions and concerns by parents/guardians, students and our own staff, including how the plan will be implemented and how it will be equitable for all secondary students.

The TDSB is not against e-learning, recognizing that it plays an important role in our system. We are, however, concerned about the mandatory nature of this plan, the timing and the general lack of information available for parents/guardians, students and staff.

In just a few short months, secondary students will begin selecting courses that will lead them to graduation. We are very concerned that this lack of information on mandatory e-learning could have a negative impact on student achievement and well-being, and ultimately hinder graduation and post-secondary education plans.

We also know that our current e-learning program is mostly accessed by higher achieving students. That means we know very little about how students with more learning needs may fare in a program that is about to become mandatory.

To ensure we are reflecting the concerns of our students, parents/guardians and staff, we will be consulting our school communities about mandatory e-learning. The results of our research will be available in February, and we will share our findings with you.

Renewal Funding Backlog

The TDSB's current repair backlog sits at a staggering \$3.8 billion as a result of years of inadequate funding. Funding improvements have been made in recent years, allowing the TDSB to address emergency issues in our schools. Unfortunately, the additional funding has not been enough to decrease the TDSB's repairs backlog. If this additional funding is discontinued and/or reduced, we estimate that the TDSB's repair backlog will grow by approximately \$0.6 billion per year.

It is imperative that the province commit to providing predictable and sustainable funding for school repairs so that the TDSB can continue to implement our long-term plan for renewal, lower our current \$3.8 billion repair backlog and modernize our schools.



Education Development Charges

The TDSB continues to advocate for access to Education Development Charges (EDCs). While other school boards in Ontario are allowed to collect EDCs, the TDSB does not qualify because it has excess capacity when assessed on a district-wide basis, regardless of significant capacity pressures and challenges faced in many neighborhood schools. This puts the TDSB at a disadvantage.

Many of our schools are over capacity as a result of significant residential intensification in certain areas. EDCs are a critical funding tool that would help the TDSB meet growth-related infrastructure needs.

Lack of sufficient space in local schools in some areas of the City has forced the TDSB to adopt different accommodation strategies for managing enrolment growth, including redirecting students from new residential developments to other TDSB schools located outside the area, the use of portables, and program and school boundary changes. For all school boards, including the TDSB, it is vitally important to assess and plan for long-term student accommodation on the basis of neighbourhood needs, not on a jurisdiction-wide basis.

In our view, the same way that developers pay for services such as roads, transit and community centres, they should contribute toward education. If the TDSB qualified for EDC's, we could expect to have \$400-million over the next 15 years to meet growth-related infrastructure needs. If we had a little flexibility in how we spend this money, some of the funds could go toward our staggering repair backlog. As it stands now, both the TDSB and the province are leaving \$400 million on the table.

Section 10 of Ontario Reg. 20/98 does not serve the purpose of either the *Education Act* or the original purpose of EDC funding, which was meant for new developments to fund new school sites. Without the restrictions found in Section 10 of Ontario Reg. 20/98, the TDSB would qualify for EDCs, which would help us meet growth-related infrastructure needs.

We recommend that the province modify or remove the restrictions in Section 10 of Ontario Regulation 20/98 to allow all school boards to qualify for EDCs and be able to use those funds for expansion of existing schools or building of new schools.

Transportation

As you know, transportation is an increasing challenge facing many boards across the province, including the TDSB. The driver shortage issue continues to be a concern as carriers struggle to maintain a sufficient number of core drivers (as well as spare drivers) to cover absences for vacation, illness, religious observances and other unexpected/planned absences. Information from the industry suggests that this problem is only going to get worse in the coming years.



To address the issue of driver retention, the Ministry has implemented a driver retention bonus. Our concern is that the program is only guaranteed to continue for the current year. We request that the ministry continue this program.

In addition, we are advocating that transportation of students with special needs be identified and funded separately. The TDSB is the largest provider of transportation services for students with special needs in the province. These are our most vulnerable students, with the greatest service needs and for whom the cost per pupil is significantly higher than standard transportation. This must be reflected in Ministry funding.

Lastly, the Ministry's review of transportation services that started three years ago, has not reported out on its findings yet. We urge the province to complete this review and make changes that would address these concerns.

In closing, I would like to reiterate the importance of thinking differently and creatively as we work through the financial challenges that we both face. We both have the same ultimate goal – to make sure all students have access to a great education that sets them up for future success. The key changes I've outlined above will help us achieve this goal, together.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robin Pilkey', is located below the 'Sincerely,' text. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Robin Pilkey CPA, CA, ICD.D
Chair, Toronto District School Board